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ABSTRACT

The voices of photographers and other visual-crafts workers rarely are heard in public discourse about local television news. All rank-and-file newsworkers potentially face reprisals resulting in shortened or blighted careers if they participate openly in assessing and criticizing the medium. A fresh examination of these newsworkers' views and morale is important because they have largely been neglected, but also for another reason: continuing economic pressures on broadcast outlets are affecting all crafts. Eighteen stations supplied 963 questionnaires through mail boxes or other informal routes to non-management staff members across all news crafts; 145 forms (15 percent) were returned. The form employed 26 questions to establish each respondent's basis for entering local TV news and specific characteristics of that first job and posed 34 questions to determine comparative characteristics of the respondent's current job and his or her outlook on the industry and its future. Results showed that workers in this study have a gloomy picture of their jobs. Since their entry into the field, most have seen changes in television news and say their impact tends to be negative. Photojournalists in particular are critical of "live shots" as poorly motivated, and find ratings pressure in conflict with their ethics. Visual craft newsworkers have neutral-to-negative news of their newscasts as journalism and suspect the public rates them similarly. There is some evidence to suggest that photojournalists make greater demands on their newscasts' journalistic performance than do even reporters. (Contains 2 tables of data and 31 references.) (TB)

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Visual Newswriters' Attitudes Toward Local Television News

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ABSTRACT

Most attitudinal studies in local television news have excluded the visual crafts--photographers and videotape editors--on the basis of their technical orientation or limited organizational power. This study of 18 stations examines assessments of specific phenomena by visual-craft workers, noting changes due to economic pressures since the 1980s, and compares their views with those of other workers. The study finds role-distinctive patterns, but also disenchantment across craft lines. It suggests that visual workers--rather than being merely blue-collar "outsiders" to news concerns--share many attitudes with others, and contribute comparably to the formation of newsroom morale.

Visual Newsworkers' Attitudes Toward Local Television News

The voices of photographers and other visual-crafts workers rarely are heard in public discourse about local television news. All rank-and-file newsworkers potentially face reprisals resulting in shortened or blighted careers if they participate openly in assessing and criticizing the medium. While reporters or producers occasionally air criticisms after leaving jobs (Burns, 1993)--less often while still in them (Teague, 1982)--visual workers seldom speak out.

This reticence and their technical rather than editorial orientation, as well as their relative weakness in the organizational decision-making dynamic (Johnstone, 1976), have led some investigators to ignore these workers' views. This may reinforce their image as technicians merely pasting supportive pictures onto the work of true journalists.

However, many factors suggest that photographers and videotape editors --whatever their public posture--share heavily in the goals, disappointments, stresses and rewards of television news, and approach parity with others in its construction. This paper examines these factors through the expressed observations and attitudes of visual-craft workers at 18 U.S. television stations.

Background

First, it is clear that pictures, while not often as independently dominant as in TV news' early days (Frank, 1993), remain essential to the communicative mission of the industry and to the daily objectives of reporters and producers (Lett, 1987). News tape not only is illustrative and even reportorial in function but can become integral to the development of news events themselves, as in the video coverage and social/legal consequences of the Reginald Denny beating in Los Angeles (Newton, 1992).

However, the basic work ethic is an almost paradoxical mandate for self-concealment, summarized by a Canadian television executive: "A news cameraman has to have news judgment, street smarts and the ability

to tell the story without words...Some cameramen could report rings around some reporters. But in all cases, the camera and the cameraman must be invisible in the story" (Boyd, 1994).

The generally unseen photographer following even an organizationally dictated story line employs unique skills in autonomous ways which entail initiative and, sometimes, risk. Newly pared-down news operations sometimes require photojournalists to file stories on their own. Some take their talents and courage to heroic lengths, as did the late Australian cameraman Neil Davis, killed in action (Pace, 1985).

The local news photographer routinely and literally shoulders great burdens (Hamill, 1993) and may face more physical danger than the reporter faces (Kielmeyer, 1992, and Vlahou, 1992). This was dramatized by the uprising of photographers against a plan by a Washington, D.C., station to put the company logo on each news car; the plan was scrapped once executives understood it would make the cars not only rolling advertisements but targets of violence in high-crime areas (Carmody, 1993).

Visual-craft workers generally have worked as partners--that is, confidants and advisers--to reporters or producers; this has required (or, some would say, created) similar journalistic perspectives. As a news professional, the author observed photographers and editors providing story analysis, tactical guidance and script feedback to reporters as they gathered and organized information. With the live camera frequently attaining the prominence of a reporter, on-scene photographers now often directly inform and advise producers and managers. Thus can the historical role of the reporter be subsumed in the cameraperson.

Recent economy moves and camera miniaturization have accelerated a trend toward the merger of reporting and photography; this is underscored by the training of combination reporter-shooters at news operations including Time magazine ("Networks are using...", 1991), Time Warner's New York 1 television operation (Priluck, 1994), and KNWS-TV in Houston, Texas (Hodges, 1993),

Working "inside," videotape editors supervise archives from which important footage is obtained, interpret their technologies to producers, and construct some news presentations with minimal newsroom control; it is these editors who fashion television stories in their final form. Even those stories which adhere strictly to scripts draw their nuanced

effectiveness from--indeed, are at the mercy of--the editor's varied and subtle skills. Because videotape in some situations not only depicts but becomes the news (Sharkey, 1993), its power passionately debated by public and professionals alike, such visual specialists cannot be marginalized.

In an unusual study of photographers' orientations toward their jobs, Smith, quoting Tuchman on the power of video as a separate "language" (Tuchman, 1978), characterized photographers as "an important part of the editorial process" (Smith, 1989). Many emphasize this centrality by declaring themselves "photojournalists," explicitly fusing their craft with that of reporters and thus seeking recognition beyond the limits of their cameras' lenses.

A fresh examination of these newsworkers' views and morale is important because they largely have been neglected, but also for another reason: Continuing economic pressures on broadcast outlets are affecting all crafts. Since the mid-1980s, local TV news has been host to budget cuts and layoffs (Rosenau, 1988) stemming mainly from cable-TV competition, the proliferation of rival quasi-news programming, and increased profit demands by owners. The response of many news operations has been low-cost but high-impact coverage and presentation (McManus, 1990)--some of it summarized in the epigram "If it bleeds, it leads." Changes stemming from this fundamental shift in the way news is defined and delivered may have affected all newsworkers' assessments of the journalistic worth of their efforts.

Many aspire to high standards which conflict with organizational realities (Berkowitz, 1993). Weaver and Wilhoit found broadcast newsworkers the most likely of any to criticize their organizations' effectiveness in informing the public, a strong predictor of low job satisfaction (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1992). Nor have anxieties been restricted to producers and reporters. Cost-cutting has claimed the jobs even of older, higher-paid visual-crafts workers (Brass, 1992), and unions seeking to preserve technical jobs face uphill battles (Feran, 1993).

Smith found the attitudes of photographers toward their work substantially aligned with those of reporters, and both groups ranking their own morale low (Smith, 1989). That study suggested further inquiry into

why this unease has bridged two occupational groups traditionally viewed as distinct.

The study at hand addressed this question, as well as several expectations arising from past research and the author's experience: that photographers and tape editors (perhaps partly because of their relatively weak organizational voices) would exhibit frustration with the quality of their stations' news products; that the quality standards they applied would resemble those which reporters profess to hold, and that the attitudinal profiles of both sets of workers would appear to stem from the same workplace phenomena.

The study asked visual workers among others to answer questions such as this: How much emphasis is placed on "live shots" at your current station, and how well motivated are they? How fair is the pay structure? How would you characterize the impact of industry changes over time on the current quality of your own work, and on newscast quality? How much prestige do you feel? How much pressure for audience ratings? How much ethical strain? What is your level of job satisfaction? How good is staff morale? How long did you originally intend to stay in local TV news--and how often do you now consider leaving it?

Method

A wide-ranging mail questionnaire was designed; while not pretested, it was screened and edited by colleagues better steeped in qualitative and quantitative research than was the author, a recent emigré from television news. The form employed 26 questions to establish each respondent's basis for entering local TV news and specific characteristics of that *first* job, and posed 34 questions to determine comparative characteristics of the respondents' *current* job and his or her outlook on the industry and its future. Most questions employed a seven-step range of possible responses, from extreme-negative at one end to extreme-positive at the other.

Without resources to conduct a random national inquiry, the author sought instead a diverse sampling of newsworkers over a wide range of geography and market size. Eighteen stations agreed to facilitate the survey. Each was affiliated with ABC, CBS or NBC (on the premise that "independent" stations were smaller and less likely to reflect national

trends in television) and the stations were located in small, medium and large metropolitan areas in various geographic regions--the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, South and West. A total (after return of surpluses) of 963 questionnaires was supplied through mailboxes or other informal routes to non-management staff members across all news crafts. Each form requested the respondent's job title, age, college major or degree, and work history in television news. News directors were asked to include technicians in the distribution.

Response as of December 15, 1993 totaled 145 forms, or 15.05 percent of the pool--a low rate but perhaps understandable: Extraordinary sensitivities evidently kept out of the study many other stations and probably many individuals from the participating stations.*

Among respondents were 44 reporters and 33 producers or associate/assistant producers. Also responding: 14 photographers, 13 tape editors, and 12 people assigned for convenience to a category labeled "photojournalists" (some using that term themselves, some combining video-related tasks in a single job, but all suggesting a visual focus with a wider perspective)--in short, a total of 39 workers assigned mainly to shoot and/or edit videotape. They were employed by 13 stations spanning all of the regions covered.

Results

Incidence of responses to selected questions was correlated with respondents' job categories through a "one-way" analysis of variance. Mean responses revealed patterns of consonance or disagreement within categories, as well as a variety of attitudinal relationships between workers within the visual crafts and those in other news crafts.

Following are results with statistically significant components (each reference in *italics* signifies the key term of a survey question):

- Photographers were least praiseful of their newscasts as "*good journalism*", rating them between the midpoint on a seven-level scale and "rather low" (Table 1). Producers and assignment editors ranked their newscasts significantly higher.** Photojournalists and tape editors were nearer neutral.

INSERT TABLE #1 ABOUT HERE

• Videotape editors were lowest of all workers in original intent to *stay* in local television news (on a scale from "less than one year" to "entire working life"); their mean response was "several years." Reporters and producers had been far more career-oriented.**

• Tape editors were most likely of any workers to say that newscasts emphasize at least moderately the remote reports called "*live shots*." Anchors were much less likely to report such an emphasis.**

• Photojournalists and photographers, asked how often they *consider leaving* local news, leaned toward "rather frequently" (Table 2). Tape editors were neutral. Most restless were producer groups; they were far less contented than weather and sports anchors.**

INSERT TABLE #2 ABOUT HERE

Of the 143 respondents who answered the consider-leaving question, 52.44 percent (75) said they consider leaving local television news at least rather frequently.

The following results did not display statistical significance but reflect mean scores of interest:

• Photographers and photojournalists found "rather negative" the *impact on their work* of changes over time in 14 areas (including promotion/style of newscasts, technology, ethics, pay, journalistic quality and prestige) since their first TV jobs (Table 1).

• These visual workers found the changes' *impact on newscasts* "moderately negative." Assignment editors saw those changes in the most positive light. (Most newsworkers traced these changes back to about the year 1987.)

• As to how often live shots are *well motivated*-, photojournalists said "sometimes"; they gave such reports a lower motivation score than reporters did. Assignment editors leaned toward "usually."

- Visual-craft workers described as no more than moderate the pressure on them to *attract viewers*; producers felt much more ratings pressure.

- However, self-described photojournalists were more likely than any other job group to report that the pressure they do experience violates their *ethics*.

- Asked how *receptive to criticism* they found management to be, visual workers tended to say "slightly unreceptive". Assignment editors said managers usually are open to criticism.

- Photojournalists (like many others) tended to call their stations' *pay* structure "rather unfair." No workers ranked pay fairness above the midrange (Table 2.)

- As to the view the *public* holds of their newscasts as good journalism, photojournalists say "moderately negative"; tape editors and photographers were near neutral, as were reporters.

- Visual workers joined most others in finding relatively little *pride or prestige* in their jobs. Producers, however, reported experiencing "quite a bit" of prestige, and assignment editors were even higher on this scale.

- Visual workers placed themselves about neutral in overall *job satisfaction*, --the lowest range in which responses occurred. Above them were assignment editors and sports or weather anchors, in the "quite"-satisfied range; reporters and news anchors only approached "rather" satisfied (Table 2).

- In assessing general newsroom *morale*, the lowest estimates came from tape editors and news anchors. All groups found morale mediocre to rather low--except for assignment editors, who leaned toward "rather high" (Table 2).

- Photographers, tape editors and photojournalists report that they feel most *secure* against layoff or firing--"a little secure".

- By a small margin, tape editors were least optimistic about the *future of broadcast news*. Assignment editors approached "slightly optimistic". Most workers were nearer neutral.

Also examined was *how the frequency with which all newsworkers consider leaving local TV news relates to their original career commitments*. Of 140 respondents across all crafts who provided answers to both questions, 61.42 percent (86) had planned to remain in the business their "entire

working life". Of this group, 45.34 percent (39) said they now consider leaving local news "rather," "quite" or "very" frequently. This exceeds the 39.53 percent (34) who said they rather rarely, quite rarely or very rarely consider leaving.

Of 47 newsworkers in all crafts who originally planned to stay in the field "several years", 57.44 percent (27) now consider leaving at least rather often. Across all job categories, workers above the age median--that is, 35 or older--were more likely than younger workers to be thinking of departing the field.

Discussion

The workers in this study who are responsible for creating local television's pictures present a rather glum picture themselves. Except for videotape editors--who occur as specialists principally in the largest television markets--the visual newsworkers entered the field oriented toward long careers. Since their entry, most have seen changes in television news and say their impact tends to be negative. (A notable exception is the tape editors; their somewhat more positive responses to certain questions may be due partly to their relative distance from field newsgathering and to the excitement imparted to their tasks by new editing technologies.)

Photojournalists in particular are critical of "live shots" as poorly motivated, and find ratings pressure in conflict with their ethics to a greater degree than does anyone else on the news staffs. Visual-craft newsworkers have neutral-to-negative views of their newscasts as journalism and suspect the public rates them similarly.

The visual workers find their pay scales neutral to unfair, their work lacking in prestige, their jobs less satisfying than they would like, and general workplace morale barely adequate. They express little optimism for the future of local broadcast-TV news, and not infrequently consider deserting it.

There is some evidence here--however statistically inconclusive--that photojournalists may make greater demands on their newscasts' journalistic performance than do even reporters, the presumptive standard-bearers of news values; this is expressed in Table 1. This suggests that

people behind the cameras may have internalized standards often arrogated to editorial workers from "true" journalistic backgrounds.

Also, there is a near-alignment of visual-craft workers with some other news crafts in frequently considering leaving local news.

The author's stated expectations of consonance between visual workers' views and those of reporters thus were met substantially by the study results, but with interesting variations, e.g., apparent deeper disenchantment in some visual workers than in reporters, and unexpectedly positive responses from videotape editors to certain practices.

Overall, many visual workers' attitudes and concerns, when compared with certain other newsworkers--particularly reporters--reflect like responses to like stimuli among people professing similar standards and goals. Thus arises the question of whether visual workers can or should be viewed separately from other crafts in assessing workplace perceptions and morale.

True, photographers and editors come less often from journalism colleges than from television engineering units, visual-arts schools, military photography or related trades. Their jobs nominally place technical demands first, and in larger cities they are represented by specialty unions. Their craft social and organizational patterns and their electronic equipment often base them at a remove from television newsrooms.

Even when conditions are not directly shared, however, the extent to which problems are discussed (and commiseration passed) across craft lines can hardly be overstated, particularly when common standards are seen to have been violated.

For example, in the biggest markets, photographers and editors see their autonomy circumscribed either by a growing emphasis on compelling verbal texts that subordinates the power of pictures (Frank, loc.cit.) or, conversely, an appetite for startling visual action which distorts news contexts. In the author's experience, these specialists constantly discuss such concerns with avowedly sympathetic reporters (and, where they exist, "field producers") while traveling to and from news locations and while meeting to produce and edit stories. These varied newsworkers' perceptions, assessments and even fantasies of workplace issues are intertwined, and together help create the phenomenon called morale.

It must be emphasized that since participation in this study was open and voluntary and thus non-random, with many stations declining to participate and only a 15 percent response rate, the results cannot be generalized confidently across the professions. On the other hand, distribution of participating stations across network affiliation was roughly even and their distribution across geography and market size was very broad (from the "top 10" to well below 100th in ADI, or "area of dominant influence").

More interesting is the possibility that the difficulty of obtaining even modest response suggests a triggering of anxieties about the subjects addressed—thus supporting the value of the study. The author introduced himself as a recent and long-time professional; the questionnaire was organized to evoke the most frank analysis of journalistic performance over time. Some less contented journalists were fearful of exposure and management reprisal despite confidentiality guarantees; still, some of these responded anyway. Since reticence spanned a wide range of attitudes and anxiety levels, it can be argued that the 15 percent final response pool did so as well.

For newswriters generally, one of the newest concerns involves the anticipated merger of verbal and visual tasks into one line of work: that is, of reporter-photographer-editors working "solo" with miniaturized cameras and advanced text-video editing technology. Only union resistance and management caution have minimized the spread of this cost-saving job consolidation. In smaller cities, station managers now seek workers who combine skills, on the basis that economically "it doesn't make sense anymore just to have specialists" (Foisie, 1993).

Thus, in this era, local TV workers in the visual crafts face many of the same uncertainties their word-oriented colleagues face, and bear at least their share of newsroom tensions. Their daily output is subject to quality erosion as work time shrinks and long-nurtured standards yield to the bottom line.

If reporters were attracted to this study by questions which matched their interests, photographers and tape editors evidently had an additional reason to participate: They seldom are asked for their views. Some of them said so.

Mass-media workers of all types like their jobs better than most other professionals like theirs, as DeFleur most recently established (DeFleur, 1992); certainly some observers, noting that newsroom unrest seldom cancels newscasts, would endorse the wry judgment that "low morale, like printer's ink, is the lifeblood of journalism" (Beam, 1993). However, it is unclear how long television news can stand aloof from job-satisfaction studies in other industries which indicate that organizational characteristics--which engender most carping --can be vital to worker commitment (Schwartz, 1989).

Numerous lines of research are suggested by this study. One might probe criteria by which some visual-crafts workers label themselves "photojournalists," and what this self-characterization implies for news presentations. Another could attempt to isolate the special traits, concerns and impacts of the news tape editor, whose views on some issues are unique. Important work might chart the new Occupied Territories of television journalism, shared by erstwhile specialists now learning one another's crafts.

Any such investigations would help to illuminate the evolution of television and of those who supply the often hard-won pictures which remain its essential element.

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Notes

*The author's professional experience told him that even with anonymity proffered, questions impinging on workplace tensions would meet with wary avoidance. To send questionnaires directly to workers at home might have led the more suspicious among them to suspect collusion with their bosses; so during the spring and summer of 1993 the news directors of 36 network-affiliated stations were asked to pass questionnaires to employees in a spirit of openness and neutral acquiescence.

Half of the stations (18) agreed to participate. Anonymity was promised to all stations, and respondents were guaranteed total confidentiality. Respondents were to return forms to the author in self-addressed envelopes. Consenting news directors agreed to reassure employees that participation in the survey was wholly voluntary and would have no effect on worker-manager relations. After the surveys were in the stations' hands for a period of weeks, reminder posters were sent in two timed waves to elicit maximum response.

Several respondents telephoned the author to probe his motives and seek reassurance that anonymity would be preserved; one announced that our conversation was being recorded. Newsroom acquaintances of the author offered to vouch for his independence and trustworthiness.

Meanwhile, 18 news directors had rejected the study outright. Four declined to explain; four said management or format changes made for bad timing; three said they were too busy; two claimed no-survey policies; one begged off due to a glut of surveys; one feared for his anonymity; one said "Things are perking along... sometimes when people write things, it can cause problems..."; one said "Maybe if you had another version with less probing questions...", and one said "This business gets enough criticism and bad publicity already; I'm not going to help you produce more of it." The foregoing suggests an appealing line of research into management attitudes.

**Difference is statistically significant at the $< .05$ level.

Table 1
Evaluation of journalistic factors by TV job category (mean scores)

	Reporters	Photo-journalists	Tape editors	Photo-graphers	Assignment editors
Industry changes' impact on quality of own work*	4.24	3.45	4.42	3.39	5.20
Industry changes' impact on whole news product*	3.45	2.64	4.17	2.69	5.20
Newscasts as good journalism†	4.41	4.08	4.46	3.54	4.83

*Ranked on 1-7 scale with 1=very negative, 7=very positive

†Ranked on 1-7 scale with 1=extremely low, 7=extremely high

Table 2 - Evaluation of workplace factors; "consider leaving" (mean scores)

	Reporters	Photo-journalists	Tape editors	Photo-graphers	Assignment editors
Fairness of pay†	3.91	3.50	4.00	4.15	3.33
Job satisfactionΔ	4.71	4.27	4.23	4.58	5.67
Newsroom morale†	3.63	3.42	3.39	3.93	4.50
Frequency consider leavingΩ	4.12	4.55	4.15	4.50	4.50

† Ranked on a 1-7 scale with 1=extremely low, 7=extremely high

Δ Ranked on a 1-7 scale with 1=extremely dissatisfied, 7=extremely satisfied

Ω Ranked on a 1-7 scale with 1=never, 7=very frequently

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